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Albanese government makes its first big mistake in foreign policy

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The Albanese government has made its first big mistake in foreign policy – but it’s a doozy.

It was unnecessary, worthless and of no diplomatic benefit to anyone to reverse the Morrison government’s decision to recognise West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and revert to the old practice of recognising Tel Aviv.

Worse, the decision was ­handled with a clumsiness unique so far in the otherwise highly polished foreign policy performance of the Labor government.

This clumsiness led to needless diplomatic fallout from Australia’s friend and ally Israel.

First, the decision – mysteriously and inexplicably – was publicised on the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website when no such decision had been made. The government denied the decision had been made. Then it made the decision and announced it, retrospectively validating the website words.

This earnt a rare and explicit rebuke of the Albanese government from the Israeli Prime Minister, centrist Yair Lapid. Lapid is no hardline right-winger. A Labor government on bad terms with Lapid is way out of kilter.

Clearly the Israeli government was not properly consulted nor prepared for the decision, especially the awkward, unprofessional way it leaked out.

What is so dispiriting about this pointless concession to the Labor left is that it achieves nothing and costs something.

The truth is Australia has always recognised West Jerusalem as part of Israel’s sovereign territory. Australia regards East Jerusalem as contested territory and its status will be determined by final status talks between Israel and the Palestinian leadership in the event of a peace agreement.

This is not Israel’s position. Israel has formally incorporated all of Jerusalem into part of the state of Israel. Thus it was not completely happy with the Morrison government’s decision to formally recognise West Jerusalem as the nation’s capital as it very explicitly did not recognise the fin­ality of Israel’s claims over East Jerusalem. The Morrison government decision was right but it too was made it in a very clumsy way.

The Albanese government’s new decision looks antique, foolish and out of line with the main international trends we should be following. The administration of Joe Biden did not reverse Donald Trump’s decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem.

Since Scott Morrison’s announcement, a slew of Arab countries, under the Abraham Accords, have concluded formal peace treaties with Israel and opened formal diplomatic recognition of the Jewish state, which remains the only meaningful democracy in the Middle East.

There is something positively anachronistic – antique – about the old ideological obsessions of the Labor left, which have driven this useless, somewhat counterproductive bit of symbolism.

It would have been better if the Morrison government had physically established the Australian embassy in West Jerusalem. Our diplomats spend an enormous amount of time there anyway, because that’s where the Israeli parliament is located, along with other key Israeli institutions.

The Morrison government didn’t do this in part because Indonesia, and one or two other Islamic friends of Australia, objected to Australia’s action. The Morrison government should have waited for a quiet moment and moved the embassy anyway. If it had taken that logical move, Labor would not have reversed it.

This is a poor decision by the Albanese government, in great contrast to the sure touch, common sense and understanding of proportion, it has so far displayed in foreign policy. Let’s hope it’s not a taste of things to come.